Pulaski Day

The Ziemia Krakowska dance troupe performs at yesterday's Pulaski Day celebration in Manchester's Pulaski Park. The annual ceremony, which honors Revolutionary War hero Brig. Gen. Casimir Pulaski, drew about 100 people. At right, Eric Jadaszewski of Dublin; his thirteen-year-old son, Stefan; and his brother-in-law, John Cordeiro of Plympton, Mass., are dressed as 17th century Winged Hussars — elite Polish cavalry troops.

BENJAMIN KEPPLE/UNION LEADER

Like the community it serves, St. Hedwig's remains rock-solid

◆Century mark: Church is a social, spiritual center for Roman Catholic Polish Americans.

By KATHRYN MARCHOCKI
Union Leader Staff

MANCHESTER — St. Hedwig's Church, the first parish built for Polish immigrants in New Hampshire, will celebrate its 100th anniversary this month.

Since it held its first Mass in 1902, the parish has been the spiritual and social center for Roman Catholic Polish Americans.

"It's your family. It's your home. It's your heart. It's your soul," said Gladys Gosselin, 71, of Manchester, a first-generation Polish American and life-long parishioner.

"It's not just a building. It's people coming together to worship God, people believing in the same thing and having the same values," she explained of the parish that will mark the culmination of its year-long 100th anniversary celebration with a Mass and banquet Oct.18.

To accommodate Polish immigrants who began settling in Manchester around the start of the 20th century, Bishop Denis Bradley searched for a Polish priest who could minister to them.

The Rev. John B. Puchala arrived from Belgium in October, 1900 to pastor to the approximate 650 Polish, Lithuanians and Russians who had settled here, according to a parish history. Early services were held in the lower chapel of St. Joseph Cathedral.

In 1902, the former First Christian Church at Merrimack and Pine streets was bought, remodeled and named after St. Hedwig.

The current parish and rectory was built at the corner of Beech and Orange streets to meet the growing parish's needs. The first Mass was celebrated Aug. 25, 1963.

The buildings were erected entirely from money donated by parishioners, most of whom were mill workers, said current pastor Monsignor Alfred A. Daniszewski.

Contributions ranged from $1 to a few hundreds dollars to $53,925 given by parish benefactors, Dr. Berıran Gifford and his wife, the former Adele Peldjak.

"They would eat bread instead of cake, then give to the church," Gosselin said of the pride and self-reliance that went into this feat.

When the $237,000 borrowed to build the new church was paid off in 1977, mortgage-burning celebrations were held at J.F.K. Coliseum followed by one inside the church, Daniszewski said.

"We almost burned the church. . . . We had a gas fire and everybody was throwing it in and it got a little too big," he recounted.

But buildings tell just part of St. Hedwig's story.

For generations of Poles who came here for economic opportunity and political freedom, the parish was the focal point of their lives and a means to preserve their language, culture and traditions, not only for themselves but their children, said parishioner Kathleen J. Philbert of Manchester.

"If you look back at the history of Poland, they have been at war so often. Their land has been divided so many times. They learned to keep going. They learned to keep doing. There is something that is guiding them," Philbert said.

"It's always been a battle for them. Whether it's fighting for their land . . . (or) for their heritage. Throughout all of this, religion has been a focal point. It's been a guiding focus," she added.

A Sunday Mass still is celebrated in Polish and the parish keeps up Polish customs, whether it be by hosting the traditional *wigilia* Christmas Eve dinner, the blessing of food baskets at Easter, or the Ladies Guild's pierogie fundraiser.

"It is the deep desire that, although you want to become American, but you don't want to forget your heritage and traditions that brought you as an individual to the point to where you are at," Philbert said.

Today the parish is an aging one, with most parishioners in their 70s and 80s, said Daniszewski.

About one to three families of new Polish immigrants join the parish a year, said Daniszewski, 84, who succeeded the Rev. Monsignor Frederic R. Kaznocha as the pastor in 1976. He is the parish's third pastor.

Parishioners take particular pride in St. Casimir's school, not only because of the strong education it provides but also because it is one of the few parish schools that did not close, Philbert said.

The grammar school, located at Merrimack and Union streets, opened in 1906 and has been run by the Felician Sisters since 1908.

"It was hard-working Polish people who were willing to do a lot of physical labor to keep the school open when others were closing," she said.

Parishioners' dedication to their school stems in part from the high regard they place on education.

DICK MORIN/UNION LEADER

Monsignor Alfred A. Daniszewski, pastor at St. Hedwig Church, is pictured with the church's 100th anniversary committee.

"That was very, very important. You needed an education to get ahead and they always wanted to do better than the parents did," said Gosselin, who went to St. Casimir's and sent her four children there.

Today, there are about 400 families in the parish, Daniszewski said.

With a priest shortage in the diocese and some urban parishes forced to close because of declining attendance, some at St. Hedwig's wonder about the future of their parish.

"The fear is, when Father Dan retires, that we won't have a Polish priest to replace him," Philbert said.

Daniszewski said he tendered his resignation to the late Bishop Leo O'Neil when he turned 75 as required of diocesan priests.

But he said O'Neil granted his request to remain pastor "as long as my health is good, God willing."

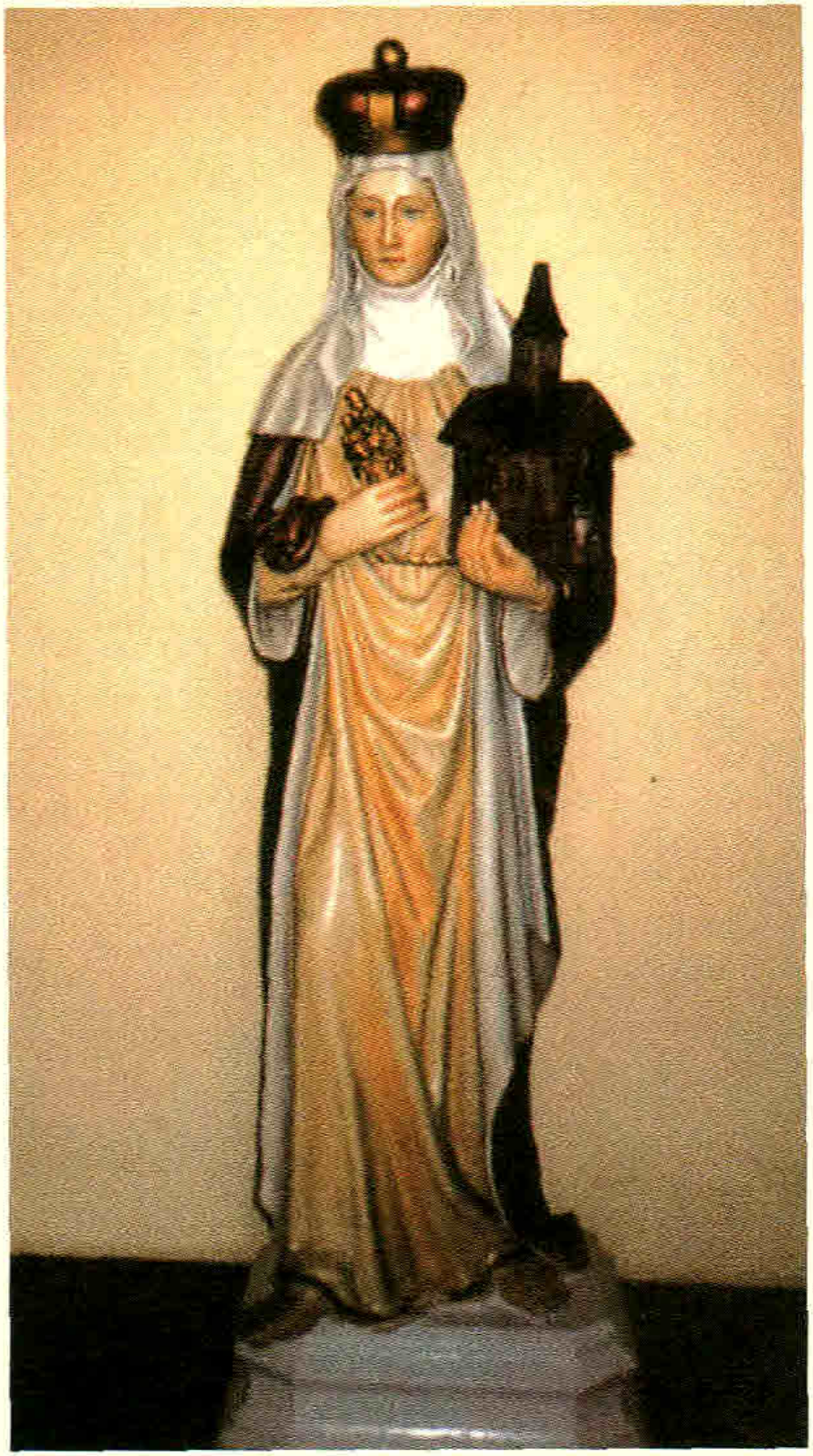
Diocesan spokesman Pat McGee said there are no plans to close the church.

Saint Hedwig

St. Hedwig Catholic Church

Celebrating
100 Years
Est. 1902

May the prayers of
St. Hedwig bring us your
help and blessings.
May her life of
remarkable humility
be an example to us all.
We ask this through our
Lord Jesus Christ your Son.
Amen.



Święta Jadwigi

Setna Rocznica

Parafii Sw. Jadwigi

18-go Pazdziernika 2003

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100th Anniversary

St. Hedwig Church

October 18, 2003

Manchester, NH